

The Promise of Partner Teaching in Urban Schools: A Case Study

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Abstract

This paper describes an ethnographic case study of a partner or co-teaching classroom in an urban preschool classroom. As part of a larger project that evaluated classroom size and team teaching structures in Kindergarten classrooms in several high poverty urban schools, one successful co-teaching classroom was studied further. Systematic observations of this classroom occurred over the course of one academic year and additional individual interviews and focus group interviews were used to gather the data. While evidence of high adult collegiality and a culture of high achievement were noted; several troubling findings surfaced. The partner or co-teachers suffered from too little effective instructional leadership in support of their abilities to develop good partner or co-teaching skills. These white female teachers also exhibited an inability to engage in critical dialogue and reflection related to the dynamics of race in their relationships with parents of African American children. The authors use a critical framework to suggest that these findings are not innocuous but, in fact, are hidden relations of power that explain the absence of positive parent-teacher relations among white teachers and children of color in this urban school.

Key words: teacher teams, partner-teaching, co-teaching, race relations, instructional leadership, high poverty urban Kindergartens

Introduction

Urban schools continue to exhibit lower student achievement than national expectations and norms. Various programs such as smaller classrooms, co-teaching or partner teaching have been implemented in elementary schools to reduce the number of children assigned to one teacher and foster more teacher-student involvement and teacher support for learning (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). This ethnographic case study presents findings from a study of a co-teaching or partner-teaching Kindergarten classroom in a large, very poor, urban district. The predominately African American students (28 out of 30) displayed above average readings scores as compared to their peers in 7 other Kindergarten classrooms in the same district. High teacher collegiality among the partner or co-teachers was evident. However, several troubling findings surfaced. These included: lack of critical reflection among the partner teachers, lack of instructional leadership to support the partner-teaching relationship, and the inability of the white teachers to understand dynamics of race in their relationships with parents. These findings support the existing notion

that classroom models in which teachers work together rather than in isolated settings to serve students who are at risk for academic failure hold promise for higher student achievement. Moreover, appropriate support from administrators and relevant education is essential in order to help white teachers understand the challenges of negotiating race differences in becoming more culturally competent in urban schools.

Purpose and Structures of Partner Teacher or Co-Teaching Classrooms

The literature contains descriptions of various structures or versions of team teaching, co-teaching, or partner-teaching that have existed in K -12 settings for many years (Cunningham, 1960, Cuban, 1993, Browne & Evans, 1994, Lee & Smith, 1996, Bishop & Stevenson (2000), Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2000, Musanti & Pence, 2010). Team teaching, co-teaching, collaborative teaming and partner-teaching are some of the terms associated with the practice of teachers working together with the same group of children in common settings. Interest in various approaches to these teacher arrangements is widely evident and ample professional literature which advocates for and describes procedures for developing, implementing and sustaining collaborative teacher arrangements exists (Hough & Irving, 1997; Lee & Smith, 1996; McCracken & Sekicky, 1998). These practices most often occur in elementary classrooms and middle school programs (Bishop & Stevenson, 2000; Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 1999, 2000; Tonso & Jung, 2006), although more recently, such arrangements are increasing in secondary classrooms (Roth, Tobin, Carambo & Dalland, 2004; Eick & Ware, 2005; Eick, Ware & Jones, 2004) and in university classes, particularly in programs for pre-service teachers (Robinson & Schaible, 1995; Scantlebury, K., Gallo-Fox, J. & B. Wassell, 2008).

The purposes of these arrangements vary. They have been increasingly sought and utilized in programs that require the shared expertise of regular and special education teachers

when children with disabilities are placed into general education classrooms (Rice, Drame, Owens & Frattura, 2007; Blanton, Griffin, Winn, & Pugach, 1997; Dettmer, Thurston, & Dyck, 2005; Pugach & Johnson, 1995; Gleason, Fennemore, & Scantlebury, 2006; Kluth & Straut, 2003). Co-teaching or partner-teaching has been documented in programs aimed at creating smaller teacher-student ratios in large classrooms in urban schools. In these programs, larger numbers of children are placed into classrooms with two teachers when facilities do not permit separate smaller classrooms (Graue, Hatch, Rao, & Oen, 2007).

In other cases, team teaching occurs when new or apprentice teachers can benefit from the extended pedagogical expertise of veteran teachers (Eick, 2004; Eick, Ware & Jones, 2004; Scantlebury, Gallo-Fox, & Wassell, 2008) or when experienced teachers with different areas of expertise share their content knowledge with teachers less knowledgeable in those areas (Murphy, Beggs, Carlisle & Greenwood, 2004).

Collaborative teaching practices, in general, are thought to facilitate stronger teacher communication and collaboration, greater instructional innovation and, in some cases, positively change the professional and interpersonal dynamics of schools. Collaborative teaching structures enhance professional skills of teachers because they learn from one another (Fishbaugh, 1997; Mostert, 1988). Interdependence and self-management among teachers increases, as well as members' overall responsibility for the groups' performance as a whole. It also appears to tighten the connection between teachers' work and student outcomes because work is more often organized around students rather than academic disciplines. This leads to greater comprehensive knowledge of and responsibility for student learning and outcomes (Crow & Pounder, 2000).

Forms of collaboration offer opportunities for critical analysis of teaching practices (Roth & Tobin, 2002), and support teachers abilities to acquire and optimize pedagogical knowledge

(Eick, 2004, Eick & Ware, 2005). Collaborative arrangements greatly expand the teaching resources of teachers (Roth, et. al., 2004) and promoted co-generative dialogues of teaching practices and pedagogical knowledge leading to co-construction of meaning and development of mutual relationships that benefit themselves and their students (Musanti & Pence, 2010; LaVan, S.K. & Beers, J., 2005). Others have found that teachers with diverse content knowledge and teaching experiences who are in collaborative relationships with other teachers helped to improve the attitudes of these teachers toward some subjects and their abilities to teach these subjects (Murphy, Beggs, Carlisle & Greenwood, 2004). These findings indicate that professionals from various fields of education are increasingly interested in creating structures for working together, rather than in isolated settings, to serve students, improve schooling and increase their own knowledge and professional growth.

Several different types of arrangements and terminology are used to describe collaborative teaching in schools today. These may be central to the organization of an entire school, or practiced only within some portion of a school by fewer teachers. These might include: interdisciplinary teams, multidisciplinary teams, teacher collaboration, team teaching, and partner teams. Table 1 offers names and brief descriptions of types found in existing literature. For our purposes here, we use the term, partner teacher or partner-teaching, since these terms fit the type of teaching arrangement in which teachers were organized as associate partners within one classroom.

This study evolved from another primary study in which we studied eight separate Kindergarten classrooms in four different schools (two classrooms in each school) over the course of one academic year. One of the most startling differences in the quality of teaching and learning was evident in the only classroom that housed 30 children with two teachers and one

part-time instructional aide in a partner-teaching model. The classroom culture was positive with evidence of active learning, caring relationships among teachers and students. We were encouraged by the evidence of higher reading scores among all the children in this classroom and we sought to better understand the partner-teaching model and its possible implications for improved urban classroom teaching and learning. In the section that follows, we detail our research project; our findings and the implications of these findings for practice.

Context & Methods

Our research involved conducting systematic observations over a period of one academic year in the partner-teaching Kindergarten classroom. Observations occurred once per month by one or both of the researchers. Subsequent individual and focus group interviews of the teachers and the school principal were also conducted and descriptive data on the school including informal conversations with other teachers, school demographics and children's achievements on classroom-based assessments were also collected.

Participants

This partner-teacher classroom featured two full-time teachers, one part-time instructional aide and 30 Kindergarten children. Twenty-eight of the children were identified as African American and two were white.

Data Analysis

Our data analysis process followed a qualitative approach of thematic analysis. This process involved "coding and then segregating the data by codes into data clumps for further analysis and description (Glesne, 2006, p. 147). Both researchers began the data analysis process simultaneously with data collection. Each reflected on their observations, memos, field notes, and interview data. The researchers "categorized, synthesized, searched for patterns, and

interpreted the data that was collected” (Glesne, 2006, p. 147). Codes were determined after multiply readings and combined into categories that represented the partner-teaching relationship and other classroom dynamics. Similar categories emerged from the individual interviews and the focus group interviews.

Observations

Students in this classroom were always actively engaged in learning during each of our monthly visits and behavior issues were noticeably less frequent in this classroom as compared to the other classrooms in our study. The teachers seemed to enjoy a strong collegial relationship. High levels of students’ achievement in reading surpassed the other seven classrooms in our larger study even though children taught in this classroom had similar backgrounds and identities as the other children in our larger study. Research supported our observation as others have noted that smaller “partner teams” of two teachers allow students and teachers to grow as a learning community (Bishop & Stevenson, 2000).

As former early childhood educators, we were particularly interested in the developmentally-appropriate learning activities and the engagement with learning exhibited among the children in this classroom. These children moved seamlessly through pleasant days that included computer instruction and play, small teacher-led reading groups, lots of hands-on activities, listening and manipulative play, large group discussion and activity, independent reading time and one-on-one instruction. They were highly engaged in their learning and activities included purposeful and high interest activities. Kindergarten level reading or higher, beginning computer skills and abilities, minimal discipline problems and student enthusiasm for learning were central in our observations. Moreover, an atmosphere depicted by affection and

warmth among adults and children with keen attention to children's needs and high expectations for their learning was evident.

We were also intrigued by the strong collegial relationship among these teachers. They seemed to truly enjoy their partner teacher relationship and their talk, actions, and non-verbal exchanges contributed to the positive ambiance of the classroom. In mid-year, we followed our observations with individual interviews of both teachers. We, then, conducted a follow-up focus group interview that included both teachers at the end of the school year. The focus group interview was an important strategy since we were eager to understand how the teachers talked about their relationship as partner teachers and the ways that they interacted together around common topics (Morgan, 1997). The focus group interview was set-up in a naturalist, interactive format. We (the two researchers) and the two associate teachers engaged in a lively dialogue that was guided by our questions: What reflective teaching practices do they employ in their work together? What can they tell us about the nature of their highly collaborative relationship? How did they establish such a strong working relationship? In the following sections, we discuss two categories of findings. The first involves the positive findings gleaned from this partner teacher classroom. The second category reveals those characteristics of good partner-teaching that were absent or weak in this case, which we labeled as critical findings. Each of these two broader groupings contains three smaller categories of findings as detailed below.

Positive Findings

Adult Collegiality

Positive examples of sustained teacher collegiality were observed in this partner-teaching classroom. The two teachers and the instructional aide worked very well together and classroom activities moved along smoothly and matter-of-factly on every day of our observations over the

academic year time period. The three teachers (two full-time and the part-time instructional aide) exhibited and articulated great respect for each other. Each of them indicated that that really liked to work with the other and described the partner-teaching arrangement as personally satisfying and professionally invigorating. The part-time instructional aide took on much more of an instructional role in the classroom than in other classrooms we observed in the larger study. She read stories to small groups of children and helped children individually with computer directions or in other small group activities as needed.

The two partner teachers instructed the key small group lessons – i.e. small reading group instruction or small group math activities and the major responsibility for student learning fell to them. But, it was clear that everyone had responsibility for the success of the classroom. All the adults directed or referred children to other teachers if it seemed that the other could answer a question or serve them better. They openly asked for others' advice on teaching in specific way and they frequently commented on children's progress to one another during the day. "Mrs. D___, you should see the ways that Thomas' reading is improving. You'll be so happy". Such comments were typical interactions.

The adults communicated with each other warmly throughout the day. They shared information about lessons plans, student needs, and other classroom issues. They reflected together on students' progress and shared discipline strategies or other classroom structuring measures with one another. The instructional aide was also included in all of the 'teacher talk' and exchanges among them.

The overall atmosphere or climate of this partner teacher classroom, we noted, was much more comfortable, child-centered, engaging, and positive as compared to the other seven classrooms in the initial study. Teachers regularly encouraged students by giving them praise and

encouragement. For example, a child said, “Look at this house I drew,” and the teacher responded, “It’s so colorful and it’s part of a wonderful community, good job.” Or this example of a teacher giving a large class instruction on the learning center they will be working on next. “Stay on the rug. Thank you for sitting criss-cross apple sauce and making kind decisions.”

Teachers consistently used redirecting or structuring comments to cue children into appropriate behavior or actions. They commented on those children who were already engaging in appropriate behaviors and used their praise to entice others to perform the same actions. For example, one day, we overheard Mrs. G. make this comment to the other teacher, Mrs. R.,

Two boys have had a rough, tough day,” “Let’s fix the problems.
We have a nice school. When listening to the teachers and doing
the right things, you are growing and getting bigger. I love the
way [so and so] is working hard. I love the way Ariana is learning
new things. I love the way people are learning to be big.

Culture of Learning

An essential element of good early childhood teaching is the ability to meet the diverse learning needs of the group while differentiating instruction to meet varying student levels and individual needs. Achieving a balance between meaning-based methods and skills instruction is especially challenging in early childhood classrooms. This classroom had some appropriate independent activities mixed with small group activity. Teachers individualized some activities based on the student’s interests and needs. It was not unusual to see one of these teachers sitting with an individual student to review a concept or offer some remediation, even though we noted that independent paper and pencil “seat work” was rare in this classroom.

In this partner-teaching classroom, all independent work was organized well and was developmentally appropriate. For example during one typical observation, we noted that of the six small learning groups in this classroom during one part of the day, three groups were with teachers and three groups were working independently. One of the independent groups consisted of three girls who listened and read along to a taped recording of a story called 'The Marketplace.' They read the story together in unison with the taped version. Then, one girl stood up to get the wooden pointer from the other center and she held up the book and pointed to the words as the rest of the group followed along. At another small independent group, four children at a magnet table arranged letters to spell vocabulary words that were listed in their language notebooks. Meanwhile, other children were worked independently on the same computerized reading program. About eight brand new Dell computers were arranged in rows along one side of the classroom and the children navigated through these reading programs without teacher assistance. All of this occurred as three additional independent groups of children worked on literacy skills with each of the three teachers. There were 27 children, in all, present on this particular day. Quiet talking, some giggling among children, the quiet sound of teachers giving directions and the rustling of students moving about the classroom freely were all evident.

Early childhood classrooms should offer multiple opportunities for children to select and pursue ideas and conduct activities independently or in small and larger groups. Learning centers are an effective way to supports these goals and children should be encouraged to select activities that allow them to develop a range of skills in all developmental areas (Neuman & Bredekamp, 2000). These practices were clearly evident here. The partner-teaching classroom was organized with six different learning centers with clear directions and purposeful structures that were set up for meaningful activities. Children were engaged in the activities and worked

well with one another in their small groups or independently. They remained focused and engaged in activities and we witnessed very few behavior problems. This was a positive early childhood learning environment.

High Student Achievement

While state mandated tests for children do not begin until the third grade in this state, teachers used criterion based testing methods on an informal basis along with other non-standardized or teacher-made assessments. This allowed the teachers to chart the progress of the students throughout the course of the year. The partner teacher classroom used “On the Mark” testing. Using this measure, students are shown a new book that they have not read before. The teacher provides a brief verbal description and then asks the student to read the book out loud while the teacher records a running record. After the book is read the student is asked several comprehension questions. The student might be able to read the text without any problem, but might have great difficulty comprehending what they have just read. If this is the case, the student remains at their current reading level and are not moved up to the next stage. When the student is able to read an unseen text without error and have fewer than two errors in comprehension, the student is moved up to the next stage. By the end of Kindergarten, in order for the children to be proficient, they need to be instructional or independent at a level C book. (Instructional indicates where the reading instruction is to begin and independent refers to reading and comprehending with few errors). Children in this classroom exhibited above average increases in reading and comprehension abilities when compared to the other seven Kindergarten classrooms in our initial study. At the end of the school year, two students in this classroom were reading at a second semester 1st grade level, while at least six students were reading in higher Level books G, H, etc. These findings were particularly noteworthy

considering the vast amount of research documenting the poor reading achievement of African American students in urban settings. Research suggests that these students are at an increased risk for failure due to poverty, linguistic differences, home literacy practices, and cultural differences (Washington, 2001). It is interesting to note that while the school as a whole might be slightly below average on state testing, this kindergarten classroom scored above average on reading assessments.

Our research above supports existing notions that teaming can contribute to creating a climate in which teachers improve their classroom management and instruction (Anness, 2000; Strahan, Bowles, Richardson, & Hanawald, 1997). However, we maintain that there is more to pedagogy than effective classroom management and age-appropriate instruction. Pedagogy involves the development of affirmative and engaging relationships among teachers and children, parents and teachers, administrators and teachers, parents and children, all of which foster the climate and conditions that ultimately might lead to success and change for children in high poverty settings.

The findings that we present next dramatically alter the positive results of this study. These findings came out of the data collected but were less apparent than the visible data gleaned from observations and interviews. In these findings, we regarded our research findings from a critical perspective – one intent on the examination of the relations of power within the social, cultural, and political contexts of this classroom, school and community. Our critical analysis critiques particular social practices to examine the ways everyday practices (or the absence of particular practices) reflects hidden relations of power that can lead to oppressive relations, and/or the silencing, marginalization, or absence of one group in relation to the privilege of another (Giroux, 1997; Leistyna & Woodrum, 1996). Such regard supports a deconstruction of

the nuances of human interaction, behavior, and relationships in order to understand diverse meanings, contradictions, and omissions in what is said, not said, written or acted out in social situations. In the section that follows, we describe findings including the absence of instructional leadership, a missing discourse about race and a lack of teachers' abilities to critically reflect on their everyday practice.

Critical Findings

Lack of Instructional Leadership

Certainly, a positive relationship between the longevity of the teacher team and student outcomes has been documented (Felner, Jackson, Kasak, Mulhall, Brand, & Flowers, 1997) and was apparent here. These partner teachers had a solid working relationship that seemed to contribute to positive student learning outcomes. To our surprise, we learned that they had worked collaboratively and operated as a team with little to no direction from their building administrator and no formal training or development in skills that fostered partner-teaching relationships for nearly a decade. The only training these teachers received occurred when they were initially 'assigned' to partner teach during the first year of implementation. This training consisted of visiting two other partner teacher classrooms in the district.

Horwich (1999) explains that a lack of training can lead to friction between partner teachers as well as unsuccessful lessons and teaching. While this was not the case here, we did discover that nearly all of the other teachers observed as part of our larger study, had tried and failed in their attempts to partner teach, or had never attempted to implement a partner teacher model due to a lack of knowledge about partnering or the availability of adequate support to do so. Given the accelerated learning of the children in this classroom and the apparent benefits of an effective partner team, we lamented the evidence incurred here that indicated the lack of

training and support for partner-teaching led to the demise of, lack of interest and/or commitment to these arrangements in other classrooms that might benefit children.

Our research confirmed Browne and Evens' (1994) claim that the implementation of partner-teaching is most often haphazard and without clear objectives. This partner team was borne almost entirely out of chance and the congenial match of teachers. They had successfully worked together for nearly 10 years, a feat more explicable by personal tenacity and matching temperament than by any support, instructional leadership, or team development efforts. These teachers explained that their success solely on their abilities to "get along" with each other. They claimed they "fit" well together because neither teacher wanted to be the "leader" or "in control" And held onto the belief that "two heads were better than one."

Administrative support for this classroom consisted only of the building principal's arrangement of the weekly teaching schedule to allow collaborative lesson planning time among them. These teachers shared one weekly common planning time, a time they kept sacred for the exchange of instructional planning, curriculum development and case review of students. This one measure of support from the principle, although a noteworthy practice well known to facilitate effective teacher collaboration and influence learning, seems alone hardly sufficient to foster successful partner-teaching across wide range of teacher team structures (Flowers et al., 2000).

Little research exists on the work of administrators in the development of strategies to help teachers learn to become more collaborative (Evans & Mohr, 1999; Tucker & Coddling, 2002). Thus, partnering efforts within schools are constrained or facilitated depending on how tensions and differences are managed by teachers, themselves. While other research has claimed that teacher partnerships with designated leaders function better than those without leaders

(Crow & Pounder, 2000), we see indications that contradict this assertion in this case. Perhaps more equalitarian teacher models such as the one we studied here have greater potential than assumed thus far. More efforts to provide training and professional development on teaming might encourage other teachers to seek out these relationships and/or strengthen of the relationships of existing partner teachers. School leaders, unfortunately, seem unaware of their critical role they may play in promoting and supporting effective teaming practices beyond administrative arrangements (Turk, Wolff, Waterbury, & Zumalt, 2002).

Missing Discourse in 'Race' Talk

These white teachers' indicated inadequate abilities and comfort speaking about the racial tensions that manifested in their classroom of predominately African American children. Through our focus group interview, it was clear to us that these teachers struggled to know how, when and to whom they should speak with in the handling of the racial issues that they faced daily. While the school teaching faculty and the administration of this school was approximately 80% white, nearly all of the instructional aides, kitchen and custodial staff were African American. Overall, the school student population in the building is 91.7% African American, 2.7% Asian, 1.3% Hispanic, 2.0% White, and 2.3% Other. In this classroom, there were 28 African American students and 2 white students, yet our questions of teachers and the principals revealed that little articulated attention was paid to these differences in racial identities among children, teachers, parents and staff. Racial issues were not discussed in any purposeful ways. For example, when we asked the classroom teachers how they deal with the racial issues that must invariably come up between them and parents, they said, "You know, the issues that do come up surprising are more like Blacks against whites, not the other way around." These white teachers perceived the African American parents' as aggressive or defensive, particularly when

interactions involved discipline of their children. They seemed unable to understand why this occurred. As a result, they tended to avoid any confrontations with the African American parents, a situation that led to limited parent involvement and strain between children's home and school life. Issues of race were not taken up by the teachers or the school administrator (also a white woman) in any sophisticated ways that might lead to a deeper understanding of power relations at work between white teachers and white administrators and African American parents and staff at the school. Some avoidance behavior resulted and teachers positioned themselves defensively. They were unable to examine or reflect on their privilege as white teachers in their relationships with parents. In fact, some of their responses to our questions indicated that they did exhibit racial bias and some defensiveness with regard to their reluctance to discuss or confront issues because of their race. "We do have, [issues with parents] and we have had issues *that way* [authors' italics]. And we talk about it in front of the African American teachers and they admit, they say you know, unfortunately, if you're Black you could say what you want, but because you're not, you can't."

The opportunity to help children explore issues of race or to delve more deeply into these differences was not taken up by these teachers or their administrator. Their comments revealed a startling level of inexperience in the exploration of issues around race and in their abilities to negotiate tensions that occur across race lines, despite their many years teaching in this setting and community. We assert that this limits their abilities to affirm the racial identity of their children in their classroom and to involve African American parents into the classroom and their children's education. Opportunities to build meaningful relationships were thwarted by the discomfort and avoidance of race talk. Not once, during any of our classrooms visits did we notice any of the African American parents present in the classroom.

Engaging parents is vital in forming a bridge between home and school (Lumpkin, 2010). Research suggests that teachers need to understand and build on existing forms of parental involvement in order to extend the culture awareness (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). While content and pedagogical knowledge remain critical to teaching, a teacher's ability to deal with social contexts, ambiguity, and the unpredictable are qualities that are an important, necessary part of effective practice and success in urban classrooms (Chamberlain, 2005).

Lack of Critical Reflection

Nearly all of the collaborative dialogue among the partner teachers concerned the logistics of sharing of teaching and classroom duties. It did not extend into deeper levels of reflective practice that might support stronger, more robust development of teaching practices, understanding of socio-cultural and/or racial issues or increase in parental involvement. When asked about the nature of their "teacher talk" with each other, one commented, "I don't think we've ever really sat down and ever had a philosophical discussion." This might stem in part from the high demands placed on teachers to meet district-mandated benchmarks derived from state standards for student achievement. One of the teachers said, "so much of what we do is in line for our learning targets so we know why we're doing this in reading and why we're doing this in writing... it's for the outcome we want." Daily conversations and planning sessions were used to organize and implement instruction, not to reflect on the practice of teaching.

A key benefit of teacher talk is the opportunity for teachers to gain multiple perspectives. As we construct new knowledge collectively we learn about others and ourselves in ways that enable us to critically reflect on and critique our experiences and examine what shaped our perspectives. Hart (1990) maintains that the development of awareness and growth leads to positive change and empowerment within our thinking and actions.

Reflection with others is an important step in professional growth. Bruner (1990) suggested that when people talk about their own experiences, they learn to better understand themselves and (re) construct new identities through changed beliefs and actions. We not only learn from others, we learn about ourselves by talking and interacting with others. When the process of reflection involves others, we enhance our ability to determine and to shape our own educational philosophies, instruction, and responsibilities to students' growth. This critical element was missing from the partner teachers reflections with each other and with other adults. In order for growth and development to occur, reflection encompassing multiple perspectives is crucial for building new knowledge.

Discussion

Partner-teaching in this kindergarten class appeared to contribute positively to student achievement and the creation of a positive learning culture in the classroom amid an atmosphere of adult collegiality. Our case study revealed that, in this case, such structures can help to produce orderly, successful, age-appropriate learning communities for young children in high poverty urban schools. However, it is also clear that teachers need more than time and space to create, sustain and enhance positive partnering relationships and classroom structures. They need strong, knowledgeable instructional leadership that is purposeful and designed to meet the challenges facing teachers who choose to team with others.

In our research, instructional leadership was inadequate and the success of the teaching partners was left mostly to chance, almost entirely reliant on the abilities of the teachers to get along with each other, organize themselves and create a classroom that worked for them and their students with little guidance and effort forthcoming from the building principal or other administrators in this large urban district.

This may be due, in part perhaps, to the fact that school administrators have little preparation or training in the leadership of such initiatives within their schools. Certainly, common planning time and scheduling of classes are entities that principals are able to arrange and govern (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain & Shamberger, 2010), but these administrative tasks should not constitute the entirety of their intervention and guidance of teacher teams. The development of effective teams is an evolutionary process (Jackson & Davies, 2000) and needs to be regarded as a one that requires consistent support and attention over time. Effective instructional leadership in schools that house partner-teaching arrangements needs to consider the dynamics of establishing and enriching the relationship between teachers. Staff development initiatives that focus on team building and/or group dynamics are essential.

Research suggests that although good schools are often led by administrators who regard themselves as “instructional leaders,” the work of most building administrators has historically tended to be managerial in nature, related more to budgeting, scheduling, and complying with regulations than to directly improving instruction or creating conditions that support children’s learning (Cuban, 1993; Darling-Hammond, 1997). Our case study inquiry did not yield an exception to these articulated notions.

Importantly, this case reveals the promise that partner-teaching provides a space for potentially fostering critical reflection and facilitating the growth of teachers’ knowledge beyond the planning of instructional methods and assessment of student learning. Structured planning time consistently given to teachers to work together for classroom planning can also serve as an important site for teacher development in other ways. Talking about teaching and the issues and dilemmas of the acts, processes and dilemmas that surround the work, with colleagues, can not only improve one’s own practice as a teacher, but can offer purposeful support for others to

construct meaning around political, social and cultural aspects of everyday events. Not only will this strengthen the learning process for all involved but lead to a culture of learning about teaching through sharing of knowledge, insights and experiences about practice, relationships and experiences. Certainly, colleagues can serve as an important source to support meaning-making. As Kain (2001) has noted already, teachers should “use team time to talk about teaching, not just troubles with kids” (p. 212). This type of structure, however, stems from the vision, creativity and commitment of instructional leaders who value and offer support for high quality teacher talk as venue for teacher development.

Reflecting on one’s teaching and pedagogy from a socio-cultural perspective can lead to deeper understandings of phenomena of our interactions with others, since such knowledge is often mediated through oral or written language (Vygotsky, 1978). As one reflects by speaking with others, they are led to question and revisit their teaching from different perspectives. Time to make sense of their experiences as teachers and as members of a partnership or team is crucial. This can become an exercise in conscious raising, where teachers as learners are helped to consider what it is they are doing, what it means, how it came to be this way, and then how they might do things differently (Smyth, 1989). Partner-teaching lends itself to this variety of experiences. Garmston and Welman (1998) believe that such exchange among teachers taken up as consistent practice “builds a sense of connection and belonging... [and] connects individuals to their underlying motivations and mental models” (p. 30).

Collegial approaches that encourage dialogue, reflection and critical inquiry, where teachers spend time talking, planning, and thinking about their work as teachers and as partners or team teachers, is challenging to achieve in today’s schools, given the pressures of time and quantity of learning required, but is fully necessary if we are to realize our goals to increase

learning of all students. Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin (1996) are adamant that schools are currently structured for failure because of this isolation and privacy from colleagues who might be able to help teachers' learning. They maintain:

Today's schools are organized in ways that support neither student learning nor teacher learning well. Teachers are isolated from one another so that they cannot share knowledge or take responsibility for overall student learning. (p. 195)

As the demand for accountability in teacher education increases, it is hoped that findings from research that clarifies benefits of partner-teaching and its potential to lead to regular habits of reflection among teachers will also indicate the potential for increased student learning and improved parent and school relationships.

Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1996) suggest the future success of teachers' learning will be dependent on our abilities to create "new images of what, when and how teachers learn" (p. 598). Only through such changes can we expect to enlarge the capacity of teachers' to be responsible for student learning. Learning to be reflective involves conceptualizing issues, problems or events and reframing them within the context of one's own learning so that new avenues can be explored or other choices made about situations or events. Framing reflection as a social practice has been an emphasis of educational theorist Solomon (1987) who has long voiced the view that teachers' understandings become more real and clearer as teachers speak about them to each other.

Deep critical reflective inquiry involves scrutiny of personal beliefs, something that is achievable if teachers are supported in the sharing of the narratives from their lives and classrooms (Schubert & Ayers, 1992). If an atmosphere of trust has been established, critical

reflection is likely to proceed. When narratives become the raw material for deeper reflection professional meanings develop, personal beliefs are revealed, and teaching is examined critically (Henderson & Hawthorne, 2000). Reflection on teachers' beliefs and the relationship between self-belief and action in the classroom is, indeed, crucial if the partnership is to move into more critical inquiry. In this way, teachers do not rely solely on external authority for guidance and validation, but can look at their own work with critical inquiry to initiate change (Chamberlin, 2005).

In this classroom, an acknowledgement of alternate perspectives about race and race relations among white teachers and African American parents was a glaring missing component among teachers that made establishment of good community and family relations difficult, if not impossible. Students, classrooms, schools, and communities shape the landscape from which teachers gather material to inform their practice. In this case, the racial issues were the 'elephant in the room,' so to speak. Moreover, young children are developing their racial identities as part of this initial schooling experience. For many in this racially segregated neighborhood school, this Kindergarten experience is their first close and consistent relationship with white people. In our society, white and lighter skin are tacitly understood as the preferred, dominant norm, so teachers' abilities to address color differences are important and have bearing on young children's self-esteem and racial pride (Tatum, 1997). The messages that children receive about the obvious skin color differences they notice between themselves and their teachers are very important, particularly since these often connote relative worth of oneself. Moreover, subtleties in the use of language and attitudes, if unexamined, certainly will translate dominate views of racial inferiority in the classroom among teachers and students that effectively reinforces the marginalization of people of color in our society. These biases, evident in the books children

read, or the messages they glean from media and in the null or implicit curriculum (Eisner, 2002) of schools, must be countered by adults in schools. Teachers need some sophistication of understanding these processes of privilege and power and the ways they are played out in the daily life of their classrooms and in their relationships with parents of color (Kailin, 2002).

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1: Collaborations and Teams: A look at the various terms

Interdisciplinary Teams	This team consists of three to five teachers with different talents and knowledge across disciplines that come together to provide integrated or thematic curriculum or instruction. In middle schools, interdisciplinary teaming has been around since the mid 1960's (Alspaugh & Harting, 1998). Within the middle school construct, each student is assigned to a team of teachers with various (usually core) disciplinary strengths who fill both instructional and advisory roles (Alspaugh & Harting, 1998).
Multidisciplinary Teams	Teachers share instructional responsibilities for particular content as a team, but take responsibilities and work from their disciplinary specialty. (Pitton, 2001).
Teacher Collaboration	Includes teacher professional learning teams where teachers come together in job-embedded professional development focused on learning together as colleagues to improve instruction and student achievement. (Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 1999). Teacher collaboration may also occur as peer mentoring or coaching, where experienced or master teachers join or lead a team of less experienced teachers.
Team Teaching	Team teaching is practiced within the same discipline or, in elementary schools, within the same grade or across grades when several teachers come together for short periods or an entire year to share some instructional responsibilities. This type of teaming usually refers to two or more teachers (Ancess, 2000).
Partnering	Two staff members are involved in the instructional collaboration (Bishop & Stevenson, 2000).
Co-teaching	Refers to a special education or ELL specialist joining a mainstream teacher within a classroom full time or for ongoing portions of the day to provide instruction that includes all students (Bishop & Stevenson, 2000).